

Hillcrest Junior High School 126 East 5300 South Murray, Utah 84107

March 4-5, 2008



Utah State Office of Education 250 East 500 South P.O. Box 144200 Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-4200

THE REPORT OF THE VISITING TEAM REVIEWING

Hillcrest Junior High School

126 East 5300 South Murray, UT 84107

March 4-5, 2008

UTAH STATE OFFICE OF EDUCATION

Patti Harrington, Ed.D. State Superintendent of Public Instruction

DIVISION OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

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FOREWORD

The major purpose of the accreditation process is to stimulate school growth and improvement so as to increase student achievement.

In these efforts, the school staff makes a comprehensive evaluation of the school's programs, operations, and results. The school determines how actual practices align to stated objectives and resulting outcomes. It is a three-phased evaluation: (1) self-evaluation, (2) on-site evaluation by an external team of educators, and (3) implementation using units of the evaluation to improve the school by effecting thoughtful change.

The evaluation, March 4-5, 2008, was conducted because of the school's desire to ensure quality education for all students in the school, and to increase student achievement.

The entire staff of Hillcrest Junior High School is commended for the time and effort devoted to studying and evaluating the various facets of the total program and to preparing the materials used by the Visiting Team. The excellent leadership given by Principal David Dunn is also commended.

The staff and administration are congratulated for their desire for excellence at Hillcrest Junior High School, and also for the professional attitude of all members of the group, which made it possible for them to see areas of weakness and strength and to suggest procedures for bringing about improvements.

While these recommendations may be used to solicit financial support to acquire some of the materials, equipment, and services needed to carry out a more effective program, it is even more important that the faculty and administration utilize them as they continue to evaluate and modify course offerings and administrative and classroom procedures to more dramatically increase student achievement at Hillcrest Junior High School.

Patti Harrington, Ed.D. State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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HILLCREST JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICT

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David Dunn	<u>-</u>			
Counseling				
Julian Warton				
Support Staff				
Jo Imlay	Registrar			
Karen Goff	Attendance Secretary			
Ilene Nelson	Financial Secretary			
Gloria Herrera				

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Bruce Eschler	Casey Mattinson	Dianne Wiscomb
Crystal Fish	Scott McLaughlin	

HILLCREST JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of Hillcrest Junior High School is to provide students with educational opportunities in a safe and inviting environment that encourages students to become lifelong learners and responsible citizens.

BELIEF STATEMENTS

We believe that:

- 1. Student learning is the chief priority of this school. Our school must contribute to preparing students to be citizens who make positive contributions to society.
- 2. Students need a safe and inviting environment in which to learn.
- 3. Students learn best when they have appropriate opportunities for success, are actively involved in the learning process, have high expectations and when the content is meaningful.
- 4. Students must be provided with a variety of instructional and assessment approaches because students learn in different ways.

Each student has unique social, emotional and intellectual needs. Students need to be provided with opportunities to continually learn and practice core values and social and life skills across all settings.

DESIRED RESULTS FOR STUDENT LEARNING (DRSLs)

Life Long Learner

- 1. Students make a commitment to creating quality work and striving for excellence.
- 2. Students use a variety of learning strategies, personal skills, and time management skills to enhance learning.
- 3. Students reflect on and evaluate their learning for the purpose of improvement.

Thinking and Reasoning Skills

- 1. Students gather, classify, organize and use information effectively to gain new knowledge.
- 2. Students support inferences and justify conclusions.
- 3. Students utilize, evaluate and refine the use of multiple strategies to solve a variety of problems.
- 4. Students generate new and creative ideas in a variety of contexts.

Interpersonal Skills

- 1. Students work with other in a variety of situations to set and achieve goals.
- 2. Students manage and evaluate their behavior in group work.
- 3. Students deal with disagreement and conflict.

Effective Communication

- 1. Students communicate with clarity, purpose and understanding of audience.
- 2. Students integrate the use of a variety of communication forms and use a wide variety of communication skills.
- 3. Students recognize and evaluate various forms of communication.

Personal and Social Responsibility

- 1. Students take responsibility for personal actions and act ethically, demonstrating honesty, fairness, integrity, and respect.
- 2. Students respect themselves and others understand and appreciate diversity.
- 3. Students develop a sense of global responsibility.
- 4. Students take responsibility for their own health and wellness.
- 5. Students act as responsible citizens in community, state and nation.

Date of Visit: March 4-5, 2008

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Verneita R. Hunt, Crestview Elementary School, Granite District, Visiting Team Co-Chairperson

Spencer Hansen, Syracuse Junior High School, Davis District, Visiting Team Co-Chairperson

Kevin Cox, Lehi Junior High School, Alpine School District

Valerie Dimas, Muellar Park Junior High School, Davis School District

Willa Jamieson, Eisenhower Junior High School, Granite School District

Chuck Stuart, Hurricane Middle School, Washington School District

VISITING TEAM REPORT

HILLCREST JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

CHAPTER 1: SCHOOL PROFILE

Hillcrest Jr. High School is one of two junior high schools (grades seven, eight, and nine) in the Murray School District. It serves students from McMillan, Parkside, Longview, and Liberty Elementary Schools, and a small number of students from Horizon Elementary. The organizational structure of the school is by grade-level teams and departments. Faculty members serve as team leaders and departmental chairs. These assignments are typically rotated each year or every other year. Each Thursday afternoon is set aside for teacher collaboration, professional development, and teaming.

The faculty and staff of Hillcrest Jr. High School consist of a principal, assistant principal, two school counselors, one part-time school social worker, 37 teachers, eight para-educators, four office staff members, four custodians, eight kitchen workers and one school resource officer. The school's current enrollment is 732 students. The teaching staff is an agreeable blend of provisional and veteran teachers who bring much energy, enthusiasm, mentoring, and support to the school. Currently, 35 percent of the teachers are provisional (three or fewer years of experience in Murray School District). Of these, 15 percent have prior experience in another district. Forty-one percent of the staff has master's degrees.

The age and rather unique configuration of the school building poses many challenges for accessibility and the supervision of students. Despite this challenge, the school has a strong commitment to providing a safe and inviting learning environment for all students. At Hillcrest Jr. High School the staff strives, through various programs, structures, and classroom strategies, to provide an enriching and developmentally appropriate curriculum for its students in an environment where all students can succeed.

a) What significant findings were revealed by the school's analysis of its profile?

The Visiting Team found that Hillcrest Junior High's analysis of its profile was very honest and forthright concerning the school's strengths and weaknesses. It is not always easy to put in print one's areas for improvement, but Hillcrest Junior High teachers and administrators have done just that.

Another significant aspect of the profile was the emphasis on student recognition. The administration has created a culture of recognizing students for a variety of accomplishments. The incentives, rewards, and focus on student work, behavior, attendance, and academic accomplishments are not confined to the upper echelons of students. All students are considered for and can achieve various rewards for their work at Hillcrest Junior High School.

- *What modifications to the school profile should the school consider for the future?*
 - The Visiting Team suggests adding the number of students achieving various levels on CRT tests along with the percentages listed. Together, both sets of data give a clearer picture.
- c) To what extent does the school's self-study accurately reflect the school's current strengths and limitations?

The Visiting Team found that the teachers, staff, administration, and community have worked through the accreditation process in a very honest and forthright way; giving accurate feedback from their focus groups, department teams, and collected data. They have not only outlined their strengths, but have freely written their limitations and areas for improvement.

Suggested Areas for Further Inquiry:

• None. The Visiting Team found Hillcrest Junior High School's profile and analysis to be very thorough, organized, and a model for accreditation.

CHAPTER 2: NORTHWEST ASSOCIATION OF ACCREDITED SCHOOLS (NAAS) TEACHING AND LEARNING STANDARDS

Mission, Beliefs and Desired Results for Student Learning (DRSLs):

a) To what degree were the school's mission statement, beliefs, and DRSLs developed and/or revised collaboratively by the school community to define a compelling purpose and vision for the school and to support student achievement?

The Visiting Team noted that since the last accreditation visit, the mission statement and DRSLs have remained unchanged, but the belief statements have been reduced in number according to recommendations from the last accreditation report. The faculty chose to focus specifically on two of the DRSLs. To address the Communication DRSL, the faculty members have implemented a school-wide writing assignment, as well as implementing a Community of Caring curriculum to address the Responsible Citizenship DRSL. Many faculty members indicated that they would prefer the term "goal" to DRSL, and that the number and focus of the DRSLs will need to be reassessed in the future.

b) To what extent do the school's mission and beliefs align to support the school's DRSLs?

The Visiting Team finds there is sufficient alignment between the mission, beliefs, and DRSLs. The Hillcrest Junior High teachers, staff, community, and administration have been using the mission and beliefs supporting the school's DRSLs for the last six years, since going through the last accreditation visit.

c) Describe the indicators (measures) that have been developed to assess the school's progress in assessing the DRSLs.

The teachers, administration, and staff have implemented a writing component across the curriculum, using a variation on the Six Traits model to assess the writing samples. The teachers should be commended for addressing grading concerns from the various curricular areas by the inception of a rubric stamp. The Visiting Team found this to be a very effective method for institutionalizing the DRSL in the culture of the school. Immediate feedback for writing is also available to students, with the MyAccess program introduced this year. Writing data has been extensively collected and disaggregated to use as a measure of progress.

The Visiting Team found that data is kept current in such areas as discipline referrals, truancy reports, etc., and a school support data spreadsheet has been developed to allow teachers to access information on students' overall academic picture. This facilitates assessment of the Responsible Citizenship DRSL.

d) To what extent do the school's mission, beliefs, and DRSLs guide the procedures, policies and decisions of the school, and appear evident in the culture of the school?

The Visiting Team observed evidence of the mission, beliefs, and DRSLs in the culture of the school in several areas. The administration is commended for the extensive use of recognition and incentive programs supporting student achievement at Hillcrest Junior High School. Students and parents noted that incentives such as the SAC Lunch Bunch and Hillcrest Heroes made them feel their children were valued members of the school community. Data is being used to identify and give support to at-risk students in the population. The collaborative effort put into cross-curricular writing assignments has made writing an integral part of the school culture, with students commenting that they even enjoy writing.

Curriculum:

a) To what extent does the staff work collaboratively to ensure the curriculum is based on clearly defined standards and the Utah Core Curriculum, reflecting the Utah Life Skills: A Guide to Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions for Success?

The School Improvement Plan and interviews with staff members indicate to the Visiting Team that time is being allotted on Thursdays for professional development and collaboration among teams, departments, and individuals on a rotating basis. According to the departmental analyses, each department meets regularly to review and revise curriculum maps, discuss testing data that drives instruction, review state standards, and share research-based best practices. When questioned, faculty members were able to clearly define the curriculum standards and goals they were working to achieve. Members of departments appeared to respect variations in methodology among members, as long as the standards were being met.

b) To what extent does the curriculum engage **all** students in inquiry, problem-solving, and higher-order thinking skills?

The Visiting Team witnessed a wide variety of teaching styles being incorporated in the implementation of the curriculum, with the aim of reaching and teaching all students. Students were given support through the Assisted Education Department, support classes, and/or tutoring to ensure they were exposed to the core concepts along with the higher-achieving students.

c) To what extent does the teaching staff work collaboratively to support the development of a curriculum that focuses on the school's DRSLs?

The faculty has worked collaboratively to successfully institutionalize the writing component connected to the communication DRSL. The perceived success of this effort has prompted interest in continuing with a similar reading component as the next step. The school has also implemented the Community of Caring curriculum, using a 15-minute instructional block on Thursdays as a vehicle for imparting the Community of Caring principles. Students commented that they enjoyed the Community of Caring lessons.

d) How does the staff use assessments to drive curriculum to ensure that **all** students can reach the intended learning outcomes?

Through observation and interviews with teachers, the Visiting Team found that assessment information is available to the faculty from various sources. Information gleaned from CRT scores was the driving force behind the hiring of a part-time math aide, with the goal of better supporting students struggling in that area. Professional development was also given to the math and science teachers on how to decipher the data from the CRT scores, with the assumption that the

information could then be used more effectively in curriculum design and instruction. The staff also has recently been provided with several school-wide data support sheets, for use in identifying needs and gaps in student achievement. It is noted that these support sheets are in the beginning stages of use and that more instruction needs to be given to the faculty in order for this tool to be truly effective in driving curriculum and instruction.

Instruction:

a) To what extent do teachers use a variety of instructional strategies to enhance student learning?

It is apparent to the Visiting Team that the Hillcrest staff is well versed in a variety of instructional strategies. Teachers openly discuss the need to reach every learner, and have taken steps to include a broad range of pedagogical strategies aimed at including all students. Teachers sense the need to consistently differentiate their instruction in order to provide an engaging experience for each student.

The Visiting Team observed lab activities, performance tasks, skill acquisition, classroom discussion, direct instruction, research/term papers, independent student exploration, self-paced learning modules, role modeling, role playing, open-ended questioning, and the extensive use of technology. These activities were well-structured and purposeful.

While the Visiting Team recognizes the challenge of crafting instructional plans that reach all students, we recommend that each teacher continue to increase his/her ability to engage all learners, and continue the emphasis on improving instructional practices that reach all students.

b) To what extent have the school and the staff developed strategies for instruction that build the capacity for explicitly teaching the identified DRSL in every classroom?

Classroom observations by the Visiting Team demonstrate the staff is committed to incorporating the writing DRSL at all levels. Staff members regularly utilized writing assignments to enhance the learning experience for their students. Subject-specific writing was apparent in many classroom observations. Teachers recognize the utility of writing skills and incorporate writing assignments that enhance student learning in each subject.

The Visiting Team commends the staff for the systematic approach to writing. It is apparent that writing is important in each classroom in the school. DWA data confirms the positive impact of the writing emphasis. Students also indicated the

value of the emphasis on writing as they recognize the need to be effective writers as a component of overall communication skills.

c) To what extent is the school's professional development program guided by identified instructional needs, and how does it provide opportunities for teachers to develop and improve their instructional strategies that support student learning?

Hillcrest Junior High's professional development plan is in direct response to identified instructional needs. Having identified writing as the key DRSL, the school crafted regular, specific professional development. This professional development led to a school-wide rubric based on the Six Traits of Writing. Continued professional development has focused on incorporating writing in all subject areas. Year-long professional development was provided through the Utah Writing Project. Also, training on MyAccess has allowed teachers to assess school-wide writing samples.

Approximately seven years ago, Hillcrest Junior High began an inclusion model that allowed greater access to mainstream students with special needs. The staff has received professional development on instructional strategies that enhance the learning experience for students with special needs.

The staff identified another instructional need from the ethnicity data. After identifying an increase in Hispanic population, ESL endorsement opportunities were provided, resulting in ESL-endorsed teachers in CTE, English, science, math, and social studies.

The Visiting Team recommends that Murray School District facilitate CRT and DWA data in a timely manner, recognizing their limits with state test reporting. Teachers expressed frustration with delays in receiving test scores. A quicker turnaround time would enhance the Hillcrest staff's ability to more readily identify instructional needs and plan effective professional development.

d) To what extent are teachers proficient in their content area, knowledgeable about current research on effective instructional approaches, and reflective on their own practices?

The Visiting Team found that teachers were endorsed in their teaching areas and met the requirements of No Child Left Behind. Classroom observations demonstrated that teachers were knowledgeable in their content areas and proficient in their instructional approach.

In discussions with teachers, the Visiting Team also found that most teachers were reflective on their own practice. Most teachers demonstrated the desire to identify areas for improvement in their own teaching practice and a willingness to make necessary changes.

The Visiting Team recommends that every teacher engage in thorough and meaningful reflection regarding his/her own effectiveness with students. This continued reflection and desire to better their own abilities is highly commendable. It will result in appropriate instructional changes, a higher level of ownership for teachers, and an increased ability to reach all students.

e) To what extent does the school effectively implement a well-defined plan for the integration of technology into its curriculum, instruction, and assessments?

The Visiting Team recognized significant improvement in the use of technology. Projectors and audio systems have been installed in most rooms. Teachers had access to a variety of technology tools to assist them in their instruction. Computer lab space had also been significantly increased. Additionally, current software, such as MyAccess and Before You Know It, is utilized throughout the school to enhance the teachers' instructional effectiveness as well as student engagement.

The Visiting Team commends the staff for following the recommendation of the 2002 Visiting Team by "integrating additional technology into their daily practice."

Assessment:

a) To what extent has the staff developed classroom or school-wide assessments with performance standards based on clearly articulated expectations for student achievement?

The Visiting Team saw evidence of the assessment of student achievement performance on a school-wide basis used by teachers in the classrooms within the area of writing. The writing, which is completed in each class two times a quarter, indicates the high level of commitment to this assessment. The staff should be highly commended for the use and variety of ways this is accomplished in the school. The Visiting Team saw that assessments in the other DRSLs were being reviewed by the staff. It is recommended that the staff continue to evaluate and plan the next step in this process.

b) To what extent does the school have a process to fairly and equitably assess school-wide and individual progress in achieving academic expectations?

The Visiting Team observed the staff using multiple assessment tools in evaluating student achievement. Examples include projects, reports, teacher-created tests, quizzes, end-of-chapter tests, and presentations. It is noted the addition of MyAccess as a tool for diagnostic, teaching, and assessment purposes and is of great value to the students and teachers. This tool makes it possible for

the staff to project and evaluate student academic expectations. Several departments have goals and standards that are used to make recommendations and accommodations. It is recommended that more collaboration between departments be scheduled to better facilitate this process.

c) To what extent does the professional staff use data to assess the success of the school in achieving its academic expectations?

There is evidence that the staff has been recently given Student Support Data Sheets for the purpose of evaluation of student achievement. The administration and counselors meet in scheduled meetings with departments to review student scores. The staff recognizes the need for this information and its relevance to student improvement. The staff is encouraged to become more familiar with the student support and tracking spreadsheets that are available to them in conjunction with other assessments used in the departments and classes.

d) To what extent does the school's professional development program allow for opportunities for teachers to collaborate in developing a broad range of student assessment strategies?

The Visiting Team saw evidence of the use of the Thursday Professional Development Time. The collaboration schedule on each Thursday is as follows: first, school-wide professional development; second, department meetings; third, grade-level teams; fourth, teacher collaboration; and fifth, either team or department time. The staff uses this time in an effective way, and is seeking additional ways and time for even more collaboration among departments. The staff is highly commended for its endeavors, and is encouraged to continue to seek ways and time to develop the collaboration necessary to effectively develop course and class curricula.

e) To what extent is there organizational agreement on the use of a school-wide scoring tool to assess the identified DRSL?

The staff is highly commended on the school-wide assessment of the effective communication DRSL. With the use of the MyAccess, the writing rubric, the school-created writing stamp, and other assessment tools, the staff does a highly effective assessment of writing throughout all the departments in the school.

CHAPTER 3: NAAS SUPPORT STANDARDS

Leadership and Organization:

- a) To what extent does the school leadership promote quality instruction by fostering an academic learning climate that actively supports teaching and learning?
 - The Visiting Team found clear and compelling evidence the school leadership team fostered an accreditation experience that is both collaborative and intensive. The school at large has had a very focused approach to its action plan targeting writing across the curriculum. The leadership team has gone to great lengths to maintain the writing focus, especially where students are learning and sharing that information with concerned stakeholders.
- b) To what extent does the school leadership employ effective decision making that is data-driven, research-based, and collaborative to monitor progress in student achievement and instructional effectiveness?
 - The Visiting Team determined that, to a large extent, the school leadership team actively collects, monitors, and shares student achievement data. Data has become more prominent in the school culture, and the success in writing is infectious. School-collected writing data clearly shows an overall increase in writing skills, as measured by the Direct Writing Assessment, over the past five school years. Departments and grade-level teams are beginning to use the data to drive instructional methods and refine teaching and learning practices.
- c) To what extent does the leadership provide skillful stewardship by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and allocation and use of resources at the school for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment which aligns with the school goals, DRSLs, and school improvement?
 - The Visiting Team was able to discern a strong connection between the school's action plan and the fiscal resources, staff development, and time allocation needed to promote and sustain the action plan. Parents, students, and teachers all concur that the school leadership team has appropriately matched organizational resources to meet the school action plan goals. It is very clear to the Visiting Team that the school leadership has provided strong and stable stewardship for a safe and effective learning environment.
- d) To what extent does the school leadership empower the entire school community and encourage commitment, participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility for student learning through meaningful roles in the decision-making process?

The Visiting Team found evidence of a commitment to involve the community in the responsibility for student learning. The school leadership has a productive Community Council and parent-teacher association where information about student learning is shared. The leadership team also ensured parental participation on the focus groups for accreditation that were an active part of the process.

e) To what extent has the school established a formal system through which each student has an adult staff member who knows the student well and assists the student in achieving the school-wide expectations for student learning?

The Visiting Team, through conversations with students, was able to determine that students felt connected to and supported at school. Students mentioned multiple school personnel who were individuals they could and would turn to in times of need. The school leadership team has perceived a need to enhance the connection between teachers and students; the Visiting Team encourages and supports this valuable process.

CHAPTER 4: NAAS SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT STANDARD

<u>Culture of Continual Improvement:</u>

a) To what extent has the school developed and implemented a comprehensive school improvement plan using Collaborating for Student Achievement, the Utah accreditation/school improvement process, that is reviewed and revised on an ongoing basis?

The Visiting Team has observed that Hillcrest Junior High has implemented a comprehensive school improvement plan based on the analysis of the self-study of its stakeholders. The administration and faculty have clearly connected the action plan to student data and assessment of that data. The departmental and focus group analyses were well thought out and openly honest about both strengths and weaknesses. The faculty is strongly committed to both the literacy and learning community aspects of the school's action plan.

b) To what extent does the school build skills and the capacity for improvement through an aligned and ongoing professional development plan focused on the school's goals for improvement?

The Visiting Team observed that Hillcrest Junior High has well-organized and ongoing professional development with the goal of literacy across the curriculum. The staff members know where they are and where they want to be, and have a definite plan on how to get there. The Visiting Team has noted many instances of collaborative planning and the use of research-driven data. It is commendable that the staff recognizes strengths within its own faculty and uses numerous in-house

presentations. The staff and administration also show a definitive desire to research various avenues that would support their plan for student achievement. The Visiting Team found evidence of a strong desire by the administration and staff to help students achieve. The students at Hillcrest Junior High also recognize this dedication by their administration and staff on their behalf.

c) To what extent is the new/revised school-wide action plan adequate in addressing the critical areas for follow-up and is there sufficient commitment to the action plan, school-wide and system-wide?

The school-wide action plan addresses the needs of the school community and is structured to support the needs of the school and the students. The action plan is data driven and provides a strong foundation for continued work in the future. The Visiting Team has observed a high level of commitment by the staff of Hillcrest Junior High to the school action plan. There is also evidence—found through teacher interviews, focus group and department discussions, and student and parent discussions—showing that the administration and staff are committed to following through with their plan and continuing into the next phase.

To what extent does the school create conditions that support productive change and continuous improvement?

The Visiting Team found that Hillcrest Junior High School has created conditions through its collaborative effort that support productive change and continuous improvement. The staff members are willing to take an honest look at themselves and their practices, and evaluate whether or not they are achieving their goals—and if not, what they can do to get to where they want to be. This willingness to constantly reflect on their practices and needs is highly commendable.

e) What significant progress has been made in implementing the original action plan since the last full visit?

Hillcrest Junior High School has reduced the number of DRSLs being addressed, focused on writing across the curriculum, and created a culture of writing throughout the school. Every class has a minimum of two writing assignments per term, which are scored using a common rubric developed by the staff. Students know what is expected of them in their writing, and are all aware of the value of the writing process. The students also commented that they value the writing. The teachers are commended for embedding authenticity in their writing lessons, such that students take ownership.

f) What significant progress has the school made in addressing the **major** recommendations of the previous Visiting Team and/or review team?

The Visiting Team has noted that Hillcrest Junior High has made significant progress in addressing the recommendations posed by the previous Visiting

Team. The faculty and administration have worked to make departmental and grade-level teams more productive, and to increase collaboration between the groups. Thursday early-release days are dedicated to teaming and collaboration and are used effectively by the various teams and departments. The school has been fitted with LCD projectors and voice enhancement systems in every classroom. Most of the faculty members actively use one or both of these on a daily basis in their classroom instruction, along with other technology available in the school.

CHAPTER 5: COMMUNITY BUILDING

To what extent does the school foster community building and working relationships within *the school?*

The Visiting Team observed many activities and programs that reduced teacher and student isolation and created a sense of community within the school. A cordial, collegial culture exists among the staff in which all employees seemed comfortable in the working environment.

In addition, interviews with students revealed a similar attitude among the student body. Students indicated very positive feelings about the administration, teachers, and school in general. Students specifically mentioned a high degree of comfort with teachers, and expressed that teachers were receptive to their needs and willing to expend extra effort to help them learn.

Students also expressed appreciation for the incentive activities provided by the school. According to the students, these incentive activities accentuated academic achievement as well as behavior expectations.

b) To what extent does the school extend the school community through collaborative networks that support student learning?

The Visiting Team identified a climate of collaboration existing in the school. In interviews with teachers, a high level of commitment to both informal and formal collaboration was noted. Sharing of ideas and lesson plans is common. Sharing of resources, instructional practices, and classroom management tactics also occurs frequently.

To assist the teachers with collaboration, the administration has created an early-dismissal day. Early dismissal gives teachers a weekly opportunity to discuss teaching practices and student achievement with both department and grade-level teams.

The Visiting Team recommends continued training on the productive use of collaboration time (i.e. use of norms, goal setting, research-based best instructional practices, identification of common learning objectives, developing common assessments, etc.).

c) To what extent has the school engaged the school community in a collaborative self-study process on behalf of students?

The Visiting Team observed that the entire school community had been involved in the self-study process. In staff interviews, teachers repeatedly mentioned their involvement in the focus group process, as well as the departmental analysis. Also, parents and students were involved in the self-study process, particularly as participants on focus groups.

d) How are results of school improvement identified, documented, used, and communicated to **all** stakeholders?

The Visiting Team identified a battery of tests that are at the Hillcrest staff's disposal to assess student achievement. Through ITBS, CRT, and DWA test results, the staff identifies documents and uses data to pinpoint needs and plan school-wide initiatives. More importantly, the staff uses this data to disaggregate subgroups and individual student performance.

Hillcrest Junior High School communicates student performance data to stakeholders through the Murray School District website, as well as through the local newspaper.

The Visiting Team commends Hillcrest Junior High School for its candid interpretation of student achievement data, as well as the dissemination of student achievement data to all stakeholders.

CHAPTER 6: MAJOR COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Commendations:

• The administration, teachers, staff, and community of Hillcrest Junior High School are commended for the tremendous work they have gone through with the self-evaluation process. Teachers have taken responsibility, and the Visiting Team commends them for genuine data analysis, finding areas of strengths and weaknesses, and the creation of future action steps. Principal David Dunn and Assistant Principal Jennifer Covington are especially commended for their leadership in this process, along with the many teachers who have put in long

hours with meetings, analysis, and writing. It is clear that the school community will go forth with this process, working with the goal of positive student achievement always present.

- The Visiting Team commends the faculty and staff for heeding the previous action plan's recommendations and successfully integrating technology hardware, software, and staff development to enhance classroom instruction and subsequent student learning.
- The Visiting Team commends the faculty and staff for creating a positive, student-centered culture with multiple reward, incentive and recognition activities that effectively motivate and encourage all students to strive for academic and behavioral excellence.
- The Visiting Team commends the faculty and staff for creating and updating content-specific "curriculum maps" accessible from the school website. Parents have found this resource both informative and helpful in assisting with the education of their children.
- The Visiting Team commends each of the respective school departments for rallying around and supporting the "writing across the curriculum" goal in the action plan. It is obvious to the Visiting Team that this goal has been implemented with a high degree of fidelity. This commitment is evidenced by increased yearly student achievement, as measured by the State Direct Writing Assessment.

Recommendations:

- The Visiting Team recommends that Hillcrest Junior High School administration and staff continue their exploration and emphasis on literacy through reading. As the staff focuses on reading, it is highly recommended that the culture of writing that permeates the curriculum be kept in the forefront, while reading is included as a complementary component. By bringing the level of reading up to the level of writing, a higher efficiency of literacy will be realized for Hillcrest Junior High students.
- The Visiting Team recommends that the administration and teachers continue their pursuit of data and its use in driving instruction in the classroom. The data forms that are presently in use are the beginning stages of a solid foundation for data analysis of student work, remembering that positive student achievement is the ultimate goal. Conversations should center on formal and informal assessment data, student abilities, and other skills related to student education. These collaborative sessions involving reflection on student data are essential conversations that should take place on a routine basis. Research has proven that collaborative conversations around disaggregated information are a positive force for greater student achievement.

• The Visiting Team recommends that the administration, teachers, staff, and community make an in-depth study of the various scheduling scenarios to facilitate the school's goal of "Foster[ing] a Learning Community," remembering that any change administrators, teachers, and the community decide to make will take time to implement.